

Why women are central to U.S. foreign policy.

By John Kerry

During my first week as the United States' Secretary of State, I had the honor of meeting with a group of courageous women from Burma. Two were former political prisoners, and although they had all endured incredible hardship in their lives, each of them was committed to moving forward - providing education and training to girls, finding jobs for the unemployed and advocating for greater participation in civil society. I have no doubt that they will continue to be powerful agents of change, bringing progress to their communities and their country in the years to come.

It's opportunities like this that remind us why it is so vital that the United States continues to work with governments, organizations and individuals around the world to protect and advance the rights of women and girls. After all, just like in our own country, the world's most pressing economic, social and political problems simply cannot be solved without the full participation of women.

According to the World Economic Forum, countries where men and women are closer to enjoying equal rights are far more economically competitive than those where the gender gap has left women and girls with limited or no access to medical care, education, elected office, and the marketplace. Similarly, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that if women farmers had the same access to seeds, fertilizer, and technology as men do, they could reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 100 million to 150 million.

Yet in too many societies and too many homes, women and girls are still undervalued, denied opportunities to go to school, and forced to marry as children. Too many lives have been lost or altered forever by gender-based violence. As the father of two daughters, I cannot imagine the pain suffered by the parents of the young woman known as "Nirbhaya," the 23-year old medical student murdered on a New Delhi bus simply for being a woman, or the anguish felt by the parents of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl shot by extremists as she too rode on a bus, simply for wanting to go to school. But I am inspired by Malala's undaunted commitment to her cause, by Nirbhaya's determination, while dying, to bring her assailants to justice, and by their fathers' courage in speaking out on behalf of their daughters and women everywhere.

No country can get ahead if it leaves half of its people behind. This is why the United States believes gender equality is critical to our shared goals of prosperity, stability, and peace, and why investing in women and girls worldwide is critical to advancing U.S. foreign policy.

We invest in the training and mentoring of women entrepreneurs so they can not only lift up their own families, but also help their countries' economies grow. We invest in girls' education so that they can escape forced early marriage, break the cycle of poverty, and develop into community leaders and engaged citizens. Increasing girls' and women's education and their access to resources also improves the health and education of the next generation.

We work with partners around the world to boost maternal health, strengthen female farmers, and prevent and address gender-based violence because all societies benefit when women are healthy, safe, and can contribute their labor, leadership and creativity to the global economy. U.S. diplomats everywhere work to integrate women fully into peace negotiations and security efforts because bringing women's experiences, concerns and insights to the table can help prevent future conflict and build more lasting peace.

Today, International Women's Day, is a day of celebration. It is also a day when each of us must recommit to ending the inequality that prevents progress in every corner of the globe. We can and we must commit to this so that each of our daughters can ride the bus to school without fear, all of our sisters can fulfill their tremendous potential, and every woman and girl can live up to her full potential.